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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of the Nominal Group Technique as a tool to assist community leaders in 23 Georgia counties, most of them rural, in identifying and prioritizing community issues. The counties and individuals involved were participants in the Georgia County Perspective, a 12-week leadership program designed to give local leaders skills for managing and directing change in their own communities. The Nominal Group Technique is a process designed to generate ideas in a group setting, focusing local attention on key issues and obtaining individual input when potential disagreement exists. Its steps are as follows: (1) silent writing of ideas relating to a specific question; (2) sharing and recording ideas in a round-robin fashion; (3) discussing each idea for clarification and to avoid duplication; and (4) individual voting using numerical ratings. Individual county groups' ratings were combined, using the same numerical system used by participants. A numerical value was computed for each issue, indicating its relative importance for Georgia leaders. The following issues, listed in order of importance, were rated as being most critical: (1) economic development; (2) education; (3) local growth planning; (4) substance abuse; (5) infrastructure; (6) resources; (7) teen pregnancy; (8) leadership development; (9) health services; (10) environment; and (11) recreation. Specific suggestions such as improving tourism, employment, and school attendance, also were identified under each issue. The document concludes that the use of the Nominal Group Technique shows Georgia county leaders to be concerned with needs of community growth and change. It is suggested that the technique might serve to alert extension specialists to counties' future programming needs. (TES)

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CRITICAL ISSUE IDENTIFICATION - A VITAL STEP FOR RURAL LEADERSHIP

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CRITICAL ISSUE IDENTIFICATION-A VITAL STEP FOR RURAL LEADERSHIP

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As rural communities face the challenges of economic, technological, and social change, skilled leaders able to focus on critical issues will be a key to local growth and development. Effective leaders who can work together using learned skills in group process will be successful in making decisions on target issues and mobilizing citizens to address community concerns.

Too often, existing leaders react to crisis issues rather than planning for future development based on community needs assessment and established goals. To plan for desirable change, effective leaders must develop skills in issue identification, problem solving, and decision making.

Broad-based community participation in issue identification and problem solving is an important ingredient in successful change. The problems communities face today are complex, requiring the expertise of many disciplines and affecting many sectors of the community. Another key to solving today's problems is local acceptance of responsibility for their own well-being. Federal and state agencies are no longer able to provide the support once depended on in the past. The level of commitment needed to address issues and implement solutions will require ownership of the problems and joint investigation of alternatives. According to Miller (1989), ownership of issues means that individuals not only understand current problems, but also are motivated to do something about the concern.

This paper describes the use of the Nominal Group Technique as a tool to assist leaders in 23 Georgia counties in identifying and prioritizing issues which they felt needed to be addressed to insure positive outcomes in quality community life. The counties and individuals involved were participants in the Georgia Cooperative Extension Service program, Community Leadership: A County Perspective. This 12-week program is designed to equip local leaders with skills to manage and direct change in their own towns and cities.

Although many issues have been identified at the state and national levels, often local groups have never analyzed their own community's needs in a non-political arena. The Community Leadership program provides both an educational setting and a forum for leaders to discuss current issues. The Nominal Group Technique is a process designed to focus local attention on key issues with

individual input. The process also alerts Extension specialists to future needs of counties for programming purposes.

The Community Leadership Program

The Community Leadership program was designed to assist counties develop and expand their leadership base. The program is a county-based program developed and implemented by the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service with co-sponsors from local chambers of commerce, boards of commissioners, and other groups interested in community leadership development.

This program, now in its fourth year, uses a broad-based design to develop local leaders at the grassroots level. Emphasis is on basic leadership skill development for current and emerging leaders. The objectives of the program are to:

- develop basic leadership skills
- identify major issues and concerns that affect a county
- understand local government functions
- improve the quality of life in the county
- help build a solid community leadership base for the county.

This intensive leadership development program consists of three units involving 30 instructional hours:

Unit I - Basic Leadership: An Individual Perspective
Unit II - Participatory Leadership: A Group Perspective
Unit III - Applied Leadership: A Community Perspective

Class sessions include a combination of lectures, audio-visual media, small group and panel discussions, individual and group assignments, special projects and informational tours/trips (Langone, 1989).

An important part of the program is the development of the group as an action group. In addition to the theory learned, the application of skills in case studies, simulations, and actual community planning is stressed. During Class 7, participants discuss and prioritize their particular community's concerns using the Nominal Group Technique.

The Nominal Group Technique

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was designed to generate ideas in a group setting (Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson, 1975).

The technique is useful in obtaining individual input when potential disagreement or controversy exists related to problems and potential solutions (Moore, 1987).

This strategy allows for individual input while overcoming typical group-process problems such as dominance by those who talk too much or deference by some to influentials. The goal of the NGT is to combine the judgements of individuals into a group decision.

This group discussion technique has distinct phases designed to allow maximum idea generation by each individual followed by structured group discussion. The steps are:

1. Silent writing of ideas related to a specific question,
2. Sharing and recording of ideas in a round-robin fashion,
3. Discussing each idea for clarification and to avoid duplication,
4. Individual voting using numerical ratings.

NGT was used during the Community Leadership program as a strategy to discuss community issues or problems. The specific question asked was "What activities can your alumni group begin that can reasonably be accomplished in the next 12 months?" This was the first opportunity for the participants to discuss local issues as a total leadership group.

Method

This analysis involved 23 counties participating in the Community Leadership program during two program years, 1987-88 and 1988-89. The counties represented each area of the state and varying types of communities. The majority are considered rural counties. Each class is made up of approximately 35 individuals selected as existing or emerging leaders. The group represents various sectors of the county geographically and in background, occupation, race, sex, and age.

Using the NGT process as described above, each county ended the session with individual votes on the list of issues generated. The County Extension Director then tabulated the votes to result in a list of the top five issues discussed. These were shared with the leadership group at a later class during which plans were made for continued activities.

For this analysis, the individual counties' lists of top issues were combined using the same numerical rating system used by

the individuals (Hudson & Cooper, 1986). The process involved assigning a value according to the importance of the item as follows:

(1) First Choice = 9 points
(2) Second Choice = 7 points
(3) Third Choice = 5 points
(4) Fourth Choice = 3 points
(5) Fifth Choice = 1 point

For each issue, a total is computed from the ratings that the item received. The group decision about the importance of an issue is based on the pooled outcome of individual votes. The item with the highest total was viewed as the most critical issue.

To merge the items listed by each county, common descriptors were used to categorize similar topics when worded differently. For example, the need to expand job opportunities was seen as part of the overall theme of economic development. The final results show these headings with examples of the specific wording used by the counties to describe each issue.

Results

Although participants were asked to identify activities that could be accomplished by alumni in 12 months, many of the issues discussed were much broader in scope. This was seen as a first step in issue identification. During later class discussions and planning sessions, the issues were refined to provide concrete plans for action. The issues as described in the NGT process provide a broad description of concerns felt by these communities.

The following table shows the 11 top-rated issues and the NGT weight based on total ratings. An additional column lists the percent of counties that listed each item. This shows that even though some items were weighted more heavily and thus ranked higher, many issues were listed repeatedly as a concern.

Table

Critical Issues Identified by Community Leadership Class Participants

Issue Identified	NGT Weight	Percent Listed
Economic development	139	86.9
- expand job opportunities		
- organize development commission		

- revitalize downtown
- expand and attract industry
- increase tourism
- study how to keep youth employed

Education	121	91.3

- upgrade educational facilities
- reduce school drop-out rate
- involve parents' involvement in education

Local growth planning	62	34.8

- develop short and long-term goals
- address zoning, land management, controlled growth
- plan for population growth

Substance abuse	55	56.5

- control drug and alcohol abuse
- educate parents to drug abuse
- drug awareness for youth

Infrastructure	37	43.4

- improve government services
- consolidate county and city
- improve roads and transportation
- provide emergency services (fire, EMT, 91)

Resources	28	17.4

- look for alternate revenues
- change property tax to sales tax
- increase county tax base

Teen pregnancy	23	39.1

- address youth at risk
- teach sex education

Leadership development	22	34.8

- develop and maintain program of leadership development
- improve morale and attitude
- faster unity in county
- keep leadership class active

Health services	21	17.4

- expand or keep hospital facilities
- provide health center, clinics

Environment	20	39.1

- plan water use management
- develop or preserve natural resources
- develop landfill, waste disposal plan
- beautification - clean up vacant lots, ditches

Recreation	20	17.4

- initiate year-round program for parks and recreation
- provide recreation for youth
- plan county recreation program
- build auditorium

Discussion

The use of the Nominal Group Technique to analyze issues shows that community leaders in Georgia counties are concerned with serious needs in order to manage growth and change. The results of priority issues from 23 counties indicated interesting similarities in some areas and diverse concerns related to individual community size or location in the state.

These community leaders seem to be aware of both broad needs in the state as well as specific local concerns. Many of the issues identified through this process in counties are the same as those identified by the Georgia Extension Advisory Committee Futuring Panel (1989). That group of leaders rated these top five issues: rural economic development, continuation of support for agriculture, attention to drug abuse/AIDS, environmental quality, youth development/parenting education.

In their "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival," the Heartland Center for Leadership Development listed many of the same concerns resulting from their study of rural communities. That list includes the need for appraising future opportunities, quality business life, economic development programs, support for education, health care, leadership development, and infrastructure. Each of these topics was considered important in Georgia communities as well.

By using this community-centered issue identification process, local leaders have targeted critical concerns and are ready to begin working towards coordinated efforts for local improvement. The results of this combined analysis alert Extension program planners to current and future needs for information and resources. Both Extension personnel and local program co-sponsors of the Community Leadership program have prepared the groundwork for future action by involving a broad base of citizens in identifying issues and planning for future action.

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